

Post-Truth Rhetoric and its Impacts on the 2016 Presidential Election

An Honors Thesis (Honr 499)

by

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Muncie, Indiana

April 2018

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2018

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Undergrad
Thesis
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Abstract

It appears at first glance as though truth is no longer relevant in a post-2016 presidential election. Indeed, many indicators suggest that the candidates, the political system, and society itself are becoming less trustworthy and more tolerant of lies. Most notably, the occurrence of Oxford Dictionary's word of the year, "post-truth", may signal the new perception of truth in today's society. The purpose of this thesis is delineate the historical basis of truth and politics to allude to the formation of post-truth as a concept. In addition, post-truth rhetoric will be compared and contrasted to classic Aristotelian rhetoric. Using the three components of rhetoric, pathos, ethos, and logos, this thesis will discover how the ultimate goal of rhetoric has changed using the perspective of classical and modern political theorists. Lastly, the theoretical concepts will be used to analyze the 2016 presidential election. The rhetorical methods of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump will be compared in regards to how effectively they used pathos, ethos, and logos, and their ability to apply post-truth rhetoric on social media.

Acknowledgments

I most graciously thank Dr. Daniel Reagan for his interest and enthusiasm in not only my project, but my academic career after my undergraduate studies. His ability to recommend resources, foster brilliance, and encourage individual creative thought has made this project a fulfilling and thought-provoking endeavor.

I would also like to thank Dr. Joshua Vandiver for pointing me in the direction of some of my most valuable and interesting resources. His input and suggestions helped this project gain momentum and significantly increased the overall quality of my ideas.

The Process Analysis Statement

I entered into this whole thesis project blindly, if not naively, optimistic. I thought that I was getting a head start on this lengthy project by starting the process the semester before I was going to graduate. I had a vague, general idea of what I wanted to do. I was fascinated by the 2016 election. I was consumed by the election for most of 2016. Then after Election Day I was obsessed with analyzing the results of the election. However, I did not know specifically what I wanted to research. It seemed that the emergence of “fake news” dominated most academic papers on the 2016 election. It felt as though every angle was already discussed and researched. I had loftier ambitions in mind. Therefore, I wanted to take a step back and analyze the larger issue that I believed may have impacted the election: the concept of post-truth. Indeed, the topic seemed perfect for an undergraduate thesis. Some resources analyzed what post-truth means, but no one had written an article about how post-truth played a role in the 2016 election. Thus, I thought that I had my idea foundationally created.

I started my project the way most people do, by searching around on Google until something seems even remotely relevant pops up. I skimmed a few articles and created a bullet point list of what my thesis will talk about. I approached Dr. Daniel Reagan in mid-September to potentially be my project advisor. He was the Chairman of the Political Science department and specialized in American Studies. I knew after having his class for a month that he was the best person to counsel me during this project. But, initially my outline for the thesis was too broad. I struggled to revise my outline so that it was broad enough to write extensively on, but not broad enough to fill a book on the topic. After several drafts and revisions, I decided to focus on the rhetoric of post-truth and compare it to Aristotelian rhetoric. I entered into winter break optimistic that the rest of project would be easier.

To my surprise, I learned that the research part was the hardest part of this whole project. I struggled, initially, to find high quality, relevant sources that provided substantive discussion on the topic I chose. I only had scattered, scarcely related information that I had to organize and craft into a coherent paper. I eventually broke down and went to a thesis writing seminar at Bracken Library. While I was there I discovered the jackpot. I used the online databases to locate five books that directly pertain to my thesis. I remember spending three hours skimming through those books and marveling at how helpful they were going to be. With the added guidance and encouragement of Dr. Reagan I read the books and jumped right into the writing portion of the project.

Writing the project started off a bit rough. I have always known that the introductions to my papers were always the weakest part of my papers, and this one was no exception. I found it very hard to properly and convincingly start a paper and introduce the ideas that I will be

discussing for at least thirty pages. How does one summarize one's points to a few sentences, knowing full well that those same ideas will be dragged out and thoroughly analyzed throughout the paper? One of my prouder additions to the paper includes the allusions to the "Allegory of the Cave" at the beginning and end of my paper. What better way, I thought, to grab the attention of the academic world than to initiate my paper with Plato? Then I could not help but think that by bringing the paper full circle at the end was pretty clever also. I discovered that once I got started writing the thesis, my ideas flowed quickly and smoothly. Before long, I had half of my project completed, but my biggest contribution was still coming.

Almost as if by chance, I decided to take a break from writing my paper. I walked around the mall and happened to glance at a book in a store. There it was just lying heaped on top of a stack of other books about the 2016 election. Scott Adams' *Win Bigly* was a game changer in terms of this project. I stood there, mouth agape, in the store reading the back cover of the book. I was astonished to realize that the guy who created the *Dilbert* comic strip had also inadvertently given me the ultimate resource to complete my thesis. The book described exactly the concepts that I had discussed earlier in my thesis, but did not draw the connections that I was drawing. It said what I wanted to say without making my points for me. It was the Holy Grail of random book purchases, and it happened during a time when I wanted to stop researching.

All in all, the project unfolded similar to what I was expecting. The project confirmed many things I already knew about myself. First of all, it confirmed that I am a self-motivated learner that has a great ability to manage time. I started my project early, used my free time to read the resources, and planned enough time to periodically write out gradual amounts of my thesis. It also proved that most of my issues are front-end loaded. It was hard for me to pinpoint exactly what I wanted to write about. I also had to discover a way to begin and end this lengthy paper. However, I learned that as my ideas flowed onto paper, the overall task in front of me became much easier. In the end, I hope that my thesis will be used as a way to view an extremely pivotal event in American history, and perhaps, will be used someday to analyze a future form of rhetoric.

A New Era of Truth

Most of you are probably familiar with Plato's Allegory of the Cave. However, if not, the idea is that most people are like slaves chained in a dark cave and can only see projections of real images. Hence, people are literally in the dark and the images they have seen and have been accustomed to their entire lives are illusions, deceptions, and lies. The prevalent interpretation of this allegory suggests that it is the role of the philosopher (who is wise enough to distinguish between the illusions and reality) to pull the masses out of their cave, into the light, and expose the true nature of the images they have witnessed since birth. However, Plato is the first to point out the indicative reality that we now face in a post-2016 presidential election: people may not like being pulled out of the cave. Plato was the first to realize that most people may prefer the fake shadows of real-life objects over the true essence of those objects (Plato's Allegory of the Cave, translated by Sheehan).

It is here that I started to draw connections between early Western political theorists and the current situation the United States of America is experiencing in 2018. Nearly a year after the highly contentious 2016 presidential race, debates continue to persist about the integrity and authenticity of the candidates and events that surrounded the monumental moment in American history. While many arguments have been made that a variety of factors influenced the election in innumerable ways, the emergence of a new concept began to circulate that I believe may have had a significant impact: the concept of post-truth.

The most instrumental solidification of the word as a part of the vernacular is its inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2016. However, the Oxford English Dictionary not only included the word in the book, it chose "post-truth" as the 2016 word of the year.

Defined as: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”, the Oxford English Dictionary picked this word on the basis that it “reflects the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of that particular year and has lasting potential as a word of cultural significance” (Word of the Year: frequently asked questions). Therefore, Oxford Dictionaries decided that this new concept of truthful irrelevancy compared to the prevalence of emotional persuasion not only best described 2016 as a whole, but will continue to play a vital role in our culture in the future. As a result, it is critical to quickly examine contextual events in 2016 that led to this word becoming the defining adjective of that year.

Without a doubt, the largest event of 2016 was the presidential race that pitted Republican candidate Donald Trump against the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. During the campaign, and even after election night, many sources criticized both administrations for lying or misleading the public. According to Politifact’s Scorecard for Donald Trump, 69% of his claims are either “Mostly False”, “False”, or “Pants on Fire” (Sharockman, 2016). In addition, a poll by RollCall.com said that 59% of people found Hillary Clinton to be dishonest and untrustworthy (Smith, 2016). Also, according to The Washington Post’s Fact Checker, “of the blog’s 314 fact checks for this election, 168 were about claims made by Trump and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. And of *those*, Trump received 59 ‘Four-Pinocchio’ ratings, while Clinton got seven. Trump’s average Pinocchio rating was 3.4, breaking Rep. Michele Bachmann’s previous worst Pinocchio average of 3.08 in 2012. Clinton, on the other hand, ended up with an average Pinocchio rating of 2.2, putting her in the same range as President Obama and former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney...” (Wang, 2016).

In addition, the reliability and honesty of several news sources were also brought into question during this year. The creeping emergence of “fake news” began to transform from ostentatiously incorrect ads and articles online to the major news sources such as CNN and NBC. Furthermore, other news media also began to wonder what the role of truth was during and shortly after 2016. As *Times* magazine bluntly asked on April 3, 2017, “Is Truth Dead?” Their conclusion, however, was not as clear. The article did state that “even exit polls on Election Day found that 65% of voters—including 28% of his own voters—said that he (Donald Trump) isn’t ‘honest and trustworthy’” (Scherer, 2017). Similarly, a Washington Post article entitled “‘Post-truth’ named 2016 word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries” describes the fate of truth very matter of factly: “It’s official: Truth is dead. Facts are passe” (Wang, 2016). Indeed, it would appear as though truth died in 2016. However, the emergence of a potential post-truth era does not signify the death of truth, but rather represents a change in the nature of truth.

A post-truth society signifies the end of an apparent era where objective facts held more substantial rhetorical weight in public opinion. In its place, the usage of more emotional language and personal passion can have a more significant impact on the public’s opinion. In addition, a post-truth society would indicate that truth is no longer a black and white concept where statements are *either completely true or completely false*. In this way, the concept of post-truth can be related to ideas formulated from the post-modern era where truth, much like every other category in the public discourse, can be relative. For example, a majority of people would concur that the Earth is round. However, in recent years a group of people have begun to subscribe to the theory of a flat Earth. This argument may seem objectively wrong, but from the viewpoint of the person who believes this theory, it is actually 100% factual. Relative truth can be further used to explain why some people deny the Holocaust, and suspect that the moon

landing was fake. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis will be to examine the origins of post-truth politics, dissect the rhetoric behind post-truth, and analyze how these concepts played an integral role in the 2016 presidential election.

Post-truth and Politics

Political scientist Hannah Arendt famously stated “No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues” (Arendt, 1967). Indeed it is almost universally assumed that politicians are notoriously “crooked” and that politics as a whole is an inherently deceitful activity. Not only do we see this in Western democracies, but in almost every form of government imaginable including monarchies, dictatorships, and communist regimes. Various theorists have offered several explanations to answer why politics are necessarily a duplicitous pursuit.

To begin, Plato invented one of the earliest examples of political deception in his groundbreaking example of the “noble lie”. “Plato...first used the expression to...safeguard the social harmony” (Bok, 1989). This particular type of lie is reserved exclusively for those in a position of governmental power. It is sometimes the duty of the nobility to tell lies for “noble” purposes. What distinguishes this type of lie is that once the lie is discovered the masses of people will be grateful because the intent of the lie was the furtherance of the public good. Naturally, this leads to the dirty hands dilemma that most public officials face. Here politicians or even just government employees must decide whether to keep their hands clean by telling the

truth, or lie in order to accomplish a longer term goal that furthers the public's interest (Bok, 1989).

However, the obvious objection raised by the noble lie theory is that politicians may not always act in the public's interest. As Sissela Bok mentions in her book *Lying* "We have learned that much deceit for private gain masquerades as being in the public interest" (Bok, 1989). In addition, political leaders may convince themselves that their lies actually further the public good when, in reality, they do not. At this point a distinction must be made between these two circumstances. The first situation is undoubtedly deceitful and morally reprehensive. When a politician tells a lie that clearly does not further the public good, but furthers only their interests, it is a blatant abuse of power and corruption. However, the second situation is closer to the concept of post-truth relativism. If the politician genuinely believes that lying to the masses will be in their best interest (even if it is not), at least their lie is noble and justified from their perspective.

This very issue of morally repulsive dishonesty in rulers was an issue that permeated the writings of Niccolo Machiavelli. While Bok advocates for more honesty and candor from elected officials and leaders, Machiavelli advocates for the *appearance* of honesty and candor. Indeed, Machiavelli began to change the way the discourses of truth and politics intermingled. Whereas the noble lie assumed that leaders were morally good and were forced to lie in order to help the masses, Machiavelli says that leaders need to appear to be moral, but must be prepared to act immoral in order to secure their position of power. In Chapter 18 of *The Prince* he states "Everyone admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep his word, and to behave with integrity rather than cunning. Nevertheless our experience has been that those princes who have done great things have considered keeping their word of little account, and have known how to

beguile men's minds by shrewdness and cunning. In the end these princes have overcome those who have relied on keeping their word" (Machiavelli, 1513). Now, we see an entirely different approach to truth and politics. At best, according to Machiavelli, a ruler must seem to be truthful, but it is wiser for rulers to use their cunning to deceive their enemies. Contrary to the noble lie theory, Machiavelli's position rests on the more selfish intentions of politicians to gain and maintain power. However, this theory assumes that the ruler always knows exactly when he/she should lie, and that the ruler is always aware of how deceitful he/she is. Also, this theory fails to address what happens when the public begins to become aware of the ruler's deceptions, which adds a new layer to the intersection of truth and politics: public opinion.

Public opinion is a crucial part of truth in relation to politics. After all, who cares if politicians are honest or not if it has no effect on the people being governed? Why should the everyday, common citizens care if their rulers are truthful? The emergence of public opinion in political discourse was created in part by the gradual evolution of modern Western democracies and ideas that began to circulate during the Age of Enlightenment. One of these ideas is the notion that the common people have the power to allow the government to rule them. It also introduced the idea that if the government or the people running the government were not meeting the needs of the citizens, it was their duty to change the status quo. The original intent here was to revolutionize and create a completely new government that was better equipped to address the needs of the people. However, from a modern perspective that could also include the less drastic action of voting the politicians out of office. Herein lies the importance of public opinion. Public opinion dictates how politicians are viewed among voters, which dictates who runs the government, which dictates the actions that the government makes. Therefore,

politicians who are honest will be viewed favorably by the public, and will stay in office, and politicians who are dishonest will be viewed unfavorably, and will lose their reelection.

In theory, this system of public opinion should perfectly hold politicians strictly accountable for any lies they may tell. It should produce a system where truth-telling is the foundation of politics and that deceit is rarely a wise political decision. However, lies only affect public opinion when they are discovered. Also, public opinion can be manipulated. Lies can be “spun” to resemble the truth and confuse the public. This new era of truth and politics can be defined as truth is what the people interpret truth to be. Politicians can still lie, and they can even get caught lying, as long as the public still views them as honest, then they can still claim to be honest. This is where truth and reality begin to bifurcate and post-truth politics begins to form.

The term post-truth was first used in a *Nation* essay by Steven Tesich in 1992 to describe the country’s faith in the national government in a post-Watergate/Irangate era. However, a fuller explanation of this new occurrence appeared in the Ralph Keyes book entitled *The Post Truth Era*. “Even though there have always been liars, lies have usually been told with hesitation, a dash of anxiety, a bit of guilt, a little shame, at least some sheepishness. Now, clever people that we are, we have come up with rationales for tampering with the truth so we can dissemble guilt-free. I call it post-truth. We live in a post-truth era” (Keyes, 2004). Keyes defines the emergence of post-truth based on his observations that lying has become habitual and commonplace. Furthermore, we have lost our disapproval of lying and our guilt towards dishonesty. Keyes further highlights the changing role of truth in society from a political perspective:

“As recently as the early 1970’s we could still get outraged about Richard Nixon’s serial deceptions. Jimmy Carter was elected in part because he promised never to tell a lie. By the time of Monica Lewinsky, and weapons of mass destruction, the mood had changed. Now our attitude seemed to be: Everyone lies especially our leaders. What’s the big deal? Dishonesty has come to feel less like the exception and more like the norm. Along with our acceptance of lying as commonplace we’ve developed ingenious ways to let ourselves off ethical hooks.”

Hence, Keyes is asserting that this new era in political truthfulness rests upon the uneasy assertion that all politicians lie and that lies are simply a political necessity. Moreover, as lies become more prevalent, they create an environment where they are tolerated, and possibly even celebrated. The traditional association of lies equating to a morally wrong decision is now being replaced with a more Machiavellian understanding that lies are occasionally unavoidable. But, this is not to suggest that truth is completely irrelevant, or as the Washington Post claims “dead”. In fact, Keyes points out that the increase in the number of lies correlates to an increase in the number of truths as well, because in this age of truthful relevancy, truth and lies are a matter of perspective. One person’s lie may be another person’s axiom. Keyes illustrates this concept by linking the concept of post-truth with the concept of post-modernism. “To devout postmodernists, there is no such thing as literal truth, only what society labels truth. That is why they call concepts of truth social constructs, ones that vary from society to society, group to group, and individual to individual” (Keyes, 2004). Elsewhere in his book, Keyes even goes so far as to cite a specific political example to show the exact moment where objective truth and post-truth diverge.

“After it was shown irrefutably that, despite his denials, arms had been traded for the freedom hostages in Iran, Reagan finally conceded the point, sort of. ‘I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages,’ he admitted. ‘My heart and my best intentions still tell me that is true, but the facts and the evidence tell me that it is not.’”

This quote perfectly encapsulates the early notions of truth and politics while also demonstrating the emergence of post-truth in the realm of political discourse. Reagan may have had the “best intentions” at heart when he made the decision to trade arms for hostages. This supports the idea of the noble lie where the ruler is allowed the right to lie for a just reason. However, simultaneously it could be suggested that Reagan is simply using truth and lies tactfully to remain in power. Perhaps he used lies instrumentally to remain in good favor with the public. Lastly, this statement shows that two separate truths can exist at the same time. One can be an objective truth supported by facts, logic, reason, and evidence, and the other being supported by emotions, passions, beliefs, and feelings. This introduces a new dimension to the topic of post-truth: the rhetorical basis of the post-truth era.

The Rhetorical Basis of Post-truth

One of the earliest and most profound writers on the topic of rhetoric identified three crucial components that one must learn in order to master the art of persuasion. “Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker (ethos); the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind (pathos); the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself (logos)” (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E). *Rhetoric* highlights Aristotle’s views on the most effective means to persuade listeners. Aristotle notes that not every situation is identical and that certain tactics must be adapted based on the speaker, audience, and occasion for speaking. A lawyer, for instance, will use very different persuasion methods to influence a jury’s decision, as opposed to

a politician trying to influence public opinion. However, the art of rhetoric, in regards to political oratory relies on these three criteria. But, according to Aristotle some of these concepts are more important for successful persuasion and the mastery of the art of rhetoric.

For starters, Aristotle blatantly states that a speaker's ethos is the most vital aspect of their persuasive effectiveness. "It is not true...that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may...be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses." Moreover, Aristotle continues to state that, "Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us *think* him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E). Notice the subtle qualifier that Aristotle attaches to his assertion above. Overall, Aristotle's discussion of rhetoric depicts the art as an instrument for good/truth/justice, but the addition of the word "think" shows that Aristotle had realist notions. Perhaps as a precursor to Machiavelli, Aristotle acknowledges that whether a speaker is actually credible is irrelevant, all that matters is that the audience thinks that the speaker is credible. This is not to say that Aristotle's views of persuasion align perfectly with Machiavelli, but it does show that Aristotle was aware of the ethical nuances that must be observed in the use of rhetoric.

Furthermore, Aristotle continues to examine the other two criteria in different ways. Although Aristotle emphasizes the role of ethos, he proceeds into a lengthy evaluation of the emotional appeals that can be used to elicit a desired response from the audience. Aristotle presents these appeals on a binary basis where on one end exists one extreme emotion (pity, anger, embarrassment) used for a specific purpose (arouse sympathy, invite disgust, draw

attention to an issue) and the exact opposite emotion on the other end (happiness, serenity, pride). What follows is a detailed instruction manual on what each emotion means and how it should be used in rhetorical persuasion. On the other hand, Aristotle scarcely devotes any time to detailing the logos of a speech. In fact, when Aristotle does mention the usage of facts and delivery he simultaneously describes how small of a role it plays in persuading audiences:

“Still, the whole business of rhetoric being concerned with appearances, we must pay attention to the subject of delivery, unworthy though it is, because we cannot do without it. The right thing in speaking really is that we should be satisfied not to annoy our hearers, without trying to delight them: we ought in fairness to fight our case with no help beyond the bare facts: nothing, therefore, should matter except the proof of those facts. Still, as has been already said, other things affect the result considerably, owing to the defects of our hearers. The arts of language cannot help having a small but real importance, whatever it is we have to expound to others: the way in which a thing is said does affect its intelligibility. Not, however, so much importance as people think. All such arts are fanciful and meant to charm the hearer. Nobody uses fine language when teaching geometry.”

Thus, Aristotle makes the case that logos/facts/evidence play a relatively small role in rhetoric. It also interesting to note that Aristotle makes a normative claim that facts *should* be the only tool that affects listeners, but Aristotle blames “the defects of our hearers” for causing ethos and pathos to play an abnormally large role in persuasion. Aristotle also points out that certain topics warrant certain types of language. Some topics, such as geometry, are not most effectively taught with passionate, emotional language. Politics, on the other hand, may inherently involve the feelings of the public, and therefore, requires more pathos to persuade.

In addition, it is worth noting not just the elements that create rhetoric, but the ultimate goal of rhetoric to begin with. According to William Grimaldi’s analysis of *Rhetoric* in 1978, “He (Aristotle) tells us quite simply that rhetoric is useful since it is through the instrumentality of the art that truth and justice are able to realize themselves in the decisions of men.” Therefore,

the end goal of rhetoric is the discovery and expression of truth. And not just any truth, rhetoric eventually arrives at *the* truth, the absolute truth. As a result, Aristotle argues the positive aspects of rhetoric's application. For in Aristotle's mind, the individual using the art of rhetoric is inherently moral and seeks to express the truth. If, however, truth and justice are defeated by untruth and injustice, it is because of an imperfect application of rhetoric which Grimaldi states is not really rhetoric in the first place. In effect, this creates only one applicable use of rhetoric with only one possibility: good judgements that reflect *the* truth. However, herein lies a contradiction. If politicians use rhetoric to persuade voters, and rhetoric is supposed to arrive at the truth, why are politicians and politics viewed as so dishonest?

The Aristotelian answer to this enigma would be that the public has made a poor decision based on their various defects. According to this view rhetoric cannot be used unethically, it can only be interpreted incorrectly or unethically. There are a few psychological theories that may support this perspective. For instance, cognitive dissonance may provide a way for the public to rearrange their reality to coincide with their previous worldview. Say, for example, you are friends with someone who does something very inappropriate. Instead of voicing your disapproval of your friend's conduct, you may create an alternate reality of sorts where you attempt to rationalize their conduct in order to reaffirm your original approval of your friend. Scott Adams, in his book *Win Bigly* written in 2017, explains how cognitive dissonance may have played a role in the 2016 election. "From the moment that Trump announced his presidency, the professional political class started mocking his intelligence, his commitment, his talent, and most important, his chances of winning... Trump's win was the trigger (for realization of cognitive dissonance). The pundits and the voters who thought they were the smart ones suddenly learned they were not." Adams is stating that this inherent flaw was on the part of the

receiver of rhetoric. The overwhelming public confidence, supplemented by numerous polls and political “experts”, predicted that Clinton would win. Therefore, when Clinton lost the race, voters and pundits created numerous reasons why Trump won. The goal of these theories was to rationalize and reaffirm their shattered perception of reality. In other words, they were attempting to resolve the dissonance with which they were experiencing.

In addition, another defect of the listener of rhetoric is the existence of confirmation bias. It is this concept that Aristotle would inevitably blame for the massive discrepancies between rhetoric’s theoretical results, and rhetoric’s actual results. Adams describes this phenomenon as “...the human reflex to interpret any new information as being supportive of the opinions we already hold” (Adams, 2017). He continues to assert that humans uncontrollably “twist” information in order to make it align with our current beliefs. He cites the example of suspected Russian collusion with the Trump campaign. Trump opponents claim that enough news stories has made it very likely that Russia colluded with Trump to influence the election results. Trump supporters, however, claim that the lack of evidence proves that Russia had no collusion with Trump whatsoever. Adams asserts that both views are indicative of the uncontrollable prevalence of confirmation bias in determining how an individual views the world. Our ability to change our opinions is limited to the sources of information we expose ourselves to. Moreover, it is much simpler for our brains to seek information that supports what we already believe to be true.

Considering the marring effects that confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance plays in how we understand rhetoric, it would be easy to see how Aristotle believed that the failure of rhetoric lies in the defects of the audience. Cognitive dissonance prevents audiences from being receptive to ideas that are contradictory to their deeply held beliefs. Audiences will create their

own facts, or even an entire alternate reality, in order to respond to perceived contradictions in their perspectives. On top of that, confirmation bias allows individuals to witness the same events, hear the same speeches, consider the same candidates, and reach completely different conclusions that support their specific beliefs. However, in the post-truth era, the purpose of rhetoric and the application of rhetoric are completely different than the Aristotelian perspective of rhetoric.

Post-truth rhetoric uses the same three components of traditional rhetoric, but changes the importance of ethos and pathos. Whereas Aristotle states that ethos and credibility are the most crucial aspects of rhetorical persuasion, post-truth rhetoric relies more on pathos to persuade audiences. Many modern writers, such as Bailey and Adams concur that emotions and passions are the most effective way to persuade audiences. Logos and ethos are not entirely irrelevant however, but in a post-modern society facts, credibility, and expertise are especially susceptible to scrutiny. For example, are professional political pollsters any more likely to accurately predict the results of an election versus, say, a high school graduate flipping a coin? In the minds of many Americans it would appear as though the results of the 2016 election are proof that polls can be less reliable than previously conceived. Even though most polls are meticulously conducted within a high degree of statistical accuracy, the appearance of reliability may be detrimentally impacted. As a result, the issue of credibility can be exceptionally tricky. The issue is further complicated by analyzing the specific person doing the speaking. We may trust Warren Buffet to give advice about the stock market (even though we know that the stock market can also be notoriously unpredictable), but should we believe his opinions on other unrelated topics? In the end, it would appear as though credibility may lie not in the opinion of others (because their opinion cannot be trusted every single time), but in ourselves. After all, according

to confirmation bias all new information will reaffirm our own beliefs, which are inherently the “correct” beliefs. Therefore, in post-truth society it makes sense that our own emotions and feelings are more reliable, because we can more accurately understand how we feel about people and issues.

With that being said, it is worth noting that both Aristotelian and post-truth rhetoric have a low regard for the value of objective facts and logic. Of the three components, both types of rhetoric states that this is the least important of the three. However, it could be argued that Aristotle still thought that facts and evidence have “a small, but important role” in persuasion. Rhetoric, according to his views, needs all three pieces of the puzzle in order to work at all. Scott Adams, however, begs to differ. In some cases, he argues, facts and reason can be very persuasive, such as when we are deciding what brand of clothing to wear. In the absence of emotional importance, humans tend to rely on logic and reason to understand new information. We also make more rational decisions when we have a sufficient amount of available information to make the best decision. The problem is that “most topics in the real world are emotional. We are emotional about our relationships, career choices, and our politics” (Adams, 2017). We are not as emotional, as Aristotle would point out, about topics such as geometry. However, in the realm of politics, at least according to Adams, emotion is what motivates our every decision. As a result, logos must be supplemented with pathos in order to persuade voters regarding political decisions.

Most recently, we have begun to see an even faster decline in the trustworthiness of facts due to an increasingly large number of sources of information, some of which can be dubiously accurate, biased, or outright false. The recent advent of “fake news” obviously had a tremendous impact on the 2016 presidential election, but the larger impact of this social phenomenon is the

erosion of reputable and neutral sources of fact. During 2016 the very definition of “fake news” changed dramatically. Previously, the term described sensationalist articles purporting wildly inaccurate news stories, most often in the form of some social media advertisement. In most cases, the stories were wildly fantastical, incredulous, and easily debunked. However, comments made during the 2016 election began to shift the location of “fake news” to encompass more traditionally respected forms of news including established newspapers such as the *New York Times*, mainstream news broadcast channels such as *CNN*, and neutral fact checking websites such as Politico. The term was used so pervasively and loosely that it would appear as though no source of information was completely accurate and trustworthy. As a result, most people had to make an unpleasant choice. They could either believe that all news sources are untrustworthy/fake/biased or that some sources are correct, while others are wrong. The consequences of disbelieving every piece of new information is an extremely difficult way to live, but selectively choosing certain news sources that align with your beliefs allows individuals to resolve their cognitive dissonance while simultaneously confirming their own biases. It is not surprising, if we are to assume that confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance are inherent in human brain functioning, that “fake news” is just way to push people into choosing which “facts” are correct and trustworthy, and which are blatant lies.

More importantly, Aristotelian rhetoric and post-truth rhetoric disagree about the ultimate goal of rhetoric. As stated earlier, Aristotle believed that truth is the natural output of rhetoric. The message being delivered to the audience carries the essence of truth, and the failure of the audience to properly interpret that message creates the appearance of deception. On the other hand, F. G. Bailey states that dialectic is the more objective way of reaching truth. Dialectic relies on opposing viewpoints to discuss, and eventually arrive at, a new brand of truth that

combines opposing viewpoints together. However, this is rarely a reality for politicians. Politicians do not seek compromises with the people they are running against to reach an agreeable truth. Instead, they must rely on rhetoric to persuade the public that their truth is correct, or at least more correct than their opponent.

“What purports to be a search for truth through the dialectical process is in reality an effort to dominate by persuasion (rhetoric). In practice the argument is ‘resolved’ either when one side succeeds in intimidating the other or when circumstances force a compromise. The dialectic that goes on evenhandedly and without mutual manipulation or intimidation is a philosopher’s luxury. Certainly it is denied to a politician or anyone acting on the world. Life in society involves power, and power involves persuasion, and persuasion in practical affairs where interests are at stake are not determined by dialectical reasoning, by logic, but by its false equivalent, rhetoric. Rhetoric, moreover, is a form of deceit.”

Herein lies the key to understanding how post-truth rhetoric functions, and the beginning of discovering how it may have impacted real life events such as the 2016 election. Aristotle had a much more optimistic and proactive view of rhetoric’s function. Although he does not state that rhetoric is truth itself, he does believe that it is the process with which truth must be channeled from a speaker to the public. More contemporary rhetorical authors cast more suspicion on the process of rhetoric. Rhetoric is a power conflict, at least according to Bailey, where the more powerful of two opposing ideas is perceived as the “truth”. Through a process of manipulation and intimidation the “truth” can be whatever the speaker claims is the truth. The rhetorical process described from this post-truth perspective explains dishonesty as an intentional act by the speaker to persuade the audience. This deceit is necessary to win over the audience and gain power over the rival points of view. With that being said, the end goal of post-truth rhetoric is not just to lie constantly for no reason. The goal is to persuade listeners. This is

primarily done by using emotional appeals and utilizing confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance.

The process with which post-truth rhetoricians attempt to persuade audiences is based on tweaking Aristotle's pathos, ethos, and logos to align with psychological understandings of the human mind. In other words, we have developed a more sophisticated understanding of how humans think since Aristotle wrote *Rhetoric*. Our understanding of confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance has allowed us to more accurately persuade people based on psychological concepts. Herein lies the major change from Aristotelian rhetoric and post-truth rhetoric. In classical rhetoric it was the defects of the audience that created untruths. However, in post-truth rhetoric, the speaker is aware of these defects and uses them against the audience to coerce them into accepting the *speaker's version of truth*. Whether this version parallels *the truth* is irrelevant. In Nietzschean terms, the speaker exerts his/her will over the audience by carefully using pathos, ethos, and logos to manipulate or control what the audience interprets as truth. In American politics, the two party system creates a world where two dominant points-of-view contend to convince the American public what the truth is. The issue is complicated even further when individual candidates within those parties present differing versions of truth. In effect, post-truth rhetoric places the blame of dishonesty on the speaker, and it is the audience's responsibility to decide for themselves what the truth actually is.

Therefore, in ancient Greece, Aristotle observed that humans relied on the credibility of experts as an indicator of how truthful their information was presented. However, times have changed since then. Ethos and logos are not used as frequently in a post-truth world. Instead, speakers use pathos more often to persuade their audiences because it is simply more effective. This is stated very plainly in the dictionary definition of post-truth: "relating to or denoting

circumstances in which objective facts (logos) are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (pathos).” However, it is interesting to note that this definition would also accurately describe Aristotle’s version of rhetoric as well. Aristotle concedes that facts often play a small role, but nevertheless, it does play an important role. In addition, Aristotle describes in great detail how pathos can and should be used to generate a certain response from the audience. The difference of post-truth rhetoric is that facts are less relevant and trustworthy than emotional appeals because we have an overabundance of sources that can contradict, confirm, discredit, change, or support our current beliefs. Our emotions seem more reliable than our facts.

In the end, we are left with two competing forms of rhetoric with contradictory goals and methods of reaching those goals. However, as evidenced by being 2016’s word of year post-truth is slowly becoming an ever more pervasive concept in contemporary society. Most notably, American politics has become the showcase for this new form of rhetoric. After close examination, I believe that the 2016 presidential election highlights the many important concepts of post-truth rhetoric, including an increase in emotional appeals, and a decrease in factual and credibility appeals. I will examine the methods that Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump used to persuade voters during the campaign and determine whether their tactics relied more on pathos, ethos, or logos. I will also compare each candidate’s respective scandals during their run for office, and *their reaction* to each scandal. Lastly, I will analyze the public personas and social media images that each candidate cultivated to persuade the voters.

Post-truth and the 2016 Election

In many ways the rhetorical basis for both Clinton and Trump's campaigns were very different. Each candidate relied on different parts of classical rhetorical styles to try and persuade voters. I am not able to objectively argue how effective each respective campaign used their rhetorical styles, but I intend to show which methods each candidate used in 2016, and explain how various commentators viewed each candidates' rhetorical strategies.

To begin, Clinton's campaign relied much more on in-depth, detailed policy goals than Trump's campaign. Clinton's speeches were often times regarded as meticulously crafted and cerebral. The words of her speeches were carefully chosen and given a large amount of weight. The campaign depended on the messages of the speeches to inform voters exactly what Clinton's platform consisted of. The goal was to clearly express Clinton's political agenda. Her speeches detailed her plans to help the economy, raise minimum wages, fight ISIS, etc. She would also frequently employ numbers and facts to defend her beliefs and endure attacks from Trump. However, according to Annie Karni from Politico, Clinton may have relied on logos too much stating that "Her staff admired her attention to detail, but knew she was often her own worst enemy. Clinton is known for taking a draft of a speech and changing it some indelible way to make it more literal and less readable." The subsequent result is that Hillary would take a simple, short phrase and rewrite it to include more detail. Clinton had a team of speechwriters struggling to phrase her speeches with just the right words and messages that communicated Clinton's individual voice. Karni continues by saying "Interviews with more than half a dozen Clinton allies inside and outside her campaign reveal a candidate who remains deeply insecure when trying to commit to a message about her campaign, and reluctant to indulge in the rhetorical flourishes that make for the rousing poetry of campaigns." Essentially, Clinton's rhetorical style involved a loquacious writing style that favored the usage of long, complex

sentence structures to convey her beliefs, instead of shorter, catchier slogans. Scott Adams argues that her particular style of “word-thinking” and reason are the least effective means of persuasion. Her tactics of using particular words and tinkering with their precise definition and meaning caused few people to change their minds, according to Adams. Conversely, Joanna Kently, a scholar of classical literature, argues that Clinton used word play more effectively by stating,

“Clinton also shines through as a presence in two particular modes: in attacks on Donald Trump, and in plays on words. Especially in wordplay attacking Trump. That is her personal comfort zone, and it shows. At a rally with Obama early in July, her glee was palpable when she declared, ‘Donald Trump can accuse me of playing the woman card all he wants, but if fighting for equal pay, and affordable childcare, and paid family leave is playing the woman card, then—DEAL ME IN!’ While she struggles to deliver conventional political slogans convincingly, here she delivered the line with gusto, and—as Aristotle leads us to expect—the audience responded viscerally, cheering ‘HILLARY! HILLARY!’”

On the other hand, Trump’s use of logos during the 2016 presidential race was altogether different. Trump used quick, verbal banter and humor to discuss other candidates. He was not as detailed or specific on his policy platform, which was viewed by opponents as a weakness because it appeared as though Trump was unprepared for the responsibilities of the presidency, and viewed by proponents as vague enough to persuade as many voters as possible. Adam’s describes Trump’s policy proposals during the campaign as “business talk”, where one starts off with an unrealistically large goal and eventually negotiates down to a more reasonable goal. Adams uses Trump’s message of tougher immigration laws and the construction of a border wall to highlight his point. During the primaries, Trump seemingly distinguished himself early on by establishing broad, ambitious goals. Later on, in the general election, Trump scaled back his goals in order to appeal to moderates and undecided voters (Adams, 2017). In addition, Trump’s

use of facts and reason were different than Clinton's use of facts and reason. Trump frequently used numbers and statistics to create a more persuasive argument. However, in a truly post-truth, relativistic way, some "facts" were simply truer than others, and some arguments required larger leaps of reason. According to Politico authors Taylor Gee, Brent Griffiths, and Ruairi Arietta-Kenna,

"He's (Trump) still inflating statistics on undocumented immigration, crime and unemployment to paint a distorted picture of domestic safety. He's still missing the mark on issues such as the documented effects of trade policy or the scientific consensus surrounding climate change. He's still oversimplifying and overstating the Obama administration's role in the rise of the Islamic States. And he's still exaggerating the size of his crowds.

Their analysis of Trump's use of facts rests on the assumption that Trump intentionally uses hyperbole to instill certain feelings in his audiences, and to project a persona of confidence and success.

With that being said, however, a slight exaggeration of numbers or misstating a fact, does not imply that Trump's use of logos was poorly executed or nonexistent. As a matter of fact, some authors believe that Trump's use of his famous "Make America Great Again" slogan contributed significantly to his victory. Each word is rhetorically loaded to appeal to a broad base of voters. Adams argues that by "accidentally" borrowing Ronald Reagan's campaign slogan, Trump linked his campaign with another successful outsider who won the presidency, creating what Adams calls a "mental anchor" that associates Trump's campaign with Reagan's campaign (Adams, 2017). The overall effect of the slogan created the message that Donald Trump was powerful enough to create the change we desperately needed in this country to create prosperity for everyone. Furthermore, this also helped the Trump brand. The slogan became instantly recognizable and became a ubiquitous talking point during the campaign. Ironically,

Clinton's campaign slogans were comparably less memorable and iconic, despite the fact that most commentators regard her as more linguistically gifted.

It is also surprising to note how each candidate used pathos in the 2016 election. To begin, Clinton's general public persona suggested a cold, emotionless politician who would say or do anything to become president. Many detractors point out her seemingly inauthentic attempt at emotional appeals during her speeches. As a result, some argue that she failed to form an emotional attachment with the audience. However, Adams presents a counter-argument that suggests that Clinton may have used pathos more often than previously thought, but perhaps she did not use it as effectively as Trump. Adams believes that Clinton's best use of pathos was by using fear of Donald Trump as president to persuade voters (Adams, 2017). The best example of this is in Clinton's Democratic National Convention nomination acceptance speech on July 28, 2016, where she said:

"Well, we heard Donald Trump's answer last week at his convention. He wants to divide us - from the rest of the world, and from each other. He's betting that the perils of today's world will blind us to its unlimited promise. He's taken the Republican Party a long way...from "Morning in America" to "Midnight in America." He wants us to fear the future and fear each other. Well, a great Democratic President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, came up with the perfect rebuke to Trump more than eighty years ago, during a much more perilous time. 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.'"

From a rhetorical standpoint, this quote brilliantly demonstrates Clinton's use of pathos. She is subtly implying that a Trump presidency should be feared because he would tear America apart. She is using fear to persuade voters about something even more fearful. Notice, also, that this quote works in a "mental anchor" by associating Clinton's campaign with Franklin Roosevelt's campaign. Lastly, Clinton uses another type of pathos to instill a sense of calmness and relief in the audience by implying that a Clinton presidency would prevent the dangers of a

Trump presidency. The deployment of fear and the avoidance of dangers is mentioned by Aristotle who states that, "...fear is caused by whatever we feel has great power of destroying or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain. Hence the very indications of such things are terrible, making us feel that the terrible thing itself is close at hand; the approach of what is terrible is just what we mean by 'danger'." Indeed, from this rhetorical perspective it would seem that the country was in "danger" of following the fear mongering tactics of Trump, considering he was nominated as the Republican Party candidate just a few days before Clinton delivered this speech.

But, in a subsequent speech, Clinton discovered that there are limits to the use of pathos. Adams mentions Clinton's notorious "basket of deplorables" comment that received much controversy and criticism. Her use of emotional language, a natural intersection of pathos to logos, to describe the Trump constituency, and not just the candidate, put her at a considerable disadvantage. She had suddenly isolated the possibility of persuading any Trump supporters by angering them in a way that confirmed their biases towards a candidate that they felt showed "her true contempt for everyday Americans" (Adams). Yet again, Adams points out the precise emotional message that distinguishes Clinton from Trump. Trump's use of logos to convey pathos, according to Adams, was masterful.

"...the English language contains lots of words. But there is only one *best* word for this situation. Trump probably found it. He once famously said he 'has the best words.' In the second dimension (of persuasion), that claim is false. In the third dimension, Trump does indeed have the best words. He proved it once again with his choice of the word 'contempt.'"

On the other side of the coin, Trump was perceived as quick-tempered and passionate during his speeches. He often used emotionally-laden language to convey his messages vividly

to his audiences. The overall impression was that Trump was authentic, or in Machiavellian terms, he at least appeared authentic. Post-truth authors comment on the importance of authenticity of emotion over the honesty of fact. If this is the case, then it would appear as though Donald Trump's rhetorical strategy utilized some of the concepts of post-truth by relying heavily on emotions to persuade the audience. After all, Adams states that Trump used the most reliable strategy by using fear to motivate the voters. "Fear is the strongest level of persuasion" (Adams, 2017). This is quite different from classic rhetoricians who believe that ethos, credibility, and good character are the strongest levels of persuasion. Nevertheless, the way Trump uses pathos can be classified under two categories: intentional and unintentional.

Intentional pathos is more straightforward and objective. This is when Trump used a specific word or phrase to intentionally convey a certain feeling in the audience. For example, when Donald Trump implied that some Mexicans were rapists, he intended the audience to become outraged at the issue he raised. This is the immediate, direct result of Trump's rhetoric. However, oftentimes his comments were met with unintentional pathos. This includes the outrage, anger, or disgust associated with Trump's comments *after* his speech was over. The exact emotions that audiences felt afterwards are more difficult to describe, and much more subjective because every source of information will present the topic in a slightly different way. On top of that, according to confirmation bias, we tend to only view the media that already supports our individual opinion of Trump's comments. Regardless of whether Trump intended the emotion to be directed at the issue or the candidate himself, Trump's overall strategy was to bring attention to the topics he wanted to discuss. The end result is that Trump reads the emotion of the audience, fuels the passions of the audience, and then watches as the audience responds to

what he is talking about. Adams describes this behavior is exemplary of a Master Persuader, or a person who can change the discussion to something that will win over audiences.

Lastly, I believe that both candidates revolutionized the way that ethos affects a candidate's rhetorical strategy. According to Aristotle's view, "There are three things which inspire confidence in the orator's own character-the three, namely, that induce us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it: good sense, good moral character, and goodwill.... It follows that anyone who is thought to have all three of these good qualities will inspire trust in his audience." Although the dictionary definition of post-truth has definite ideas about the value of logos and pathos in shaping public opinion, it says nothing explicit about the ethos of the speaker. However, we do know that post-truth tends to value pathos more than ethos, but it is unclear exactly how much more effective one is over the other. Which brings about the discussion of Clinton and Trump's ethos.

Clinton proponents were very audible in expressing the benefit of Clinton's lengthy role as a public servant and her long-standing tradition as a career politician. She brought experience and political expertise to her campaign. Compared to Trump, she represented the political establishment, the everyday norms of politics as usual. In some respects, Clinton was the candidate that *acted* presidential. According to many speculative rumors, she may have even played a large role in running Bill Clinton's campaign, and that kind of information is what stuck in the public's mind when they thought of Hillary Clinton. However, it could be argued, that Clinton suffered during her campaign because, despite her best efforts, she simply did not *look* presidential. Although I chose not to examine how Clinton's gender affected the race, it is worth noting how her gender affected her ability to appeal presidentially credible. Standing next to

Trump, in his suit and tie, she appeared less presidential simply due to what we collectively imagine a president to look like based on historical precedent.

Meanwhile, Trump is perhaps the exact opposite in terms of projecting ethos visually. Trump is a visually distinctive icon. He has the large, intimidating stature. He has the instantly recognizable hairstyle. And, he has a highly expressionistic face that allows him to project winning confidence, smug humor, annoyed disregard, or serious business-talk. However, many opponents were quick to point out that he simply *looks* presidential, but he certainly does not *act* presidential. Coming into the race, even Trump referred to himself as the underdog due to his lack of experience and political savviness. Many opponents argued that Trump did not behave professionally enough to hold the highest office in America. Many comments and actions called into question his credibility and presidentiality. Making fun of reporters with disabilities, refusing to disavow the Ku Klux Klan, and insulting rival candidates were all acts that made the public wonder if he was qualified to be president. However, it is interesting to note that in a post-truth era the traditional notions of positive ethos may be opposite what Aristotle proposed thousands of years ago. In fact, the lack of experience was turned into a positive aspect of Trump's campaign. Yet another example of Trump's logos involves the popular "drain the swamp" motto which reflects his ethos as a tough-talking political outsider seeking to disrupt the corrupt establishment. Also, it is worth noting that there is a potential cognitive dissonance between the public personas of the candidates in 2016 and the election results. The candidate that represents the "political machine" won the popular vote, and the populist candidate won the Electoral College vote. Therefore, in order to correct this discrepancy we may distort or twist or perceptions of the candidates to explain away this paradox.

Furthermore, post-truth ethos may deal with more superficial details such as how a candidate looks or what they say, but Aristotelian ethos deals with the candidates' values, character, and intentions. For simplicity's sake I am going to hold Clinton and Trump's intentions for this country as equal. Both candidates clearly want to pursue policies that benefit the country, they just have different personal means to reach those goals. By evaluating how well they conveyed ethos in Aristotelian terms, it is clear that Aristotle would have claimed that both candidates failed to use rhetoric properly. There are no shortage of critics for both candidates that question their honesty and integrity. As a matter of fact, Ralph Keyes wrote a book called *The Post-Truth Era* in 2004, a whole ten years before either candidate even began their campaign, in which he called into question both Hillary and Donald's honesty.

In a prophetic section of the book, Keyes notes how Donald Trump used "truthful hyperbole" to exaggerate claims about how many copies of his book were sold and how successful *The Apprentice* was. Then, amazingly, in another section, he calls out Clinton for her claim that she was named after Sir Edmund Hillary, despite the fact that he had not yet climbed Mount Everest when she was born (Keyes, 2004). Therefore, the prospect of traditional, complete honesty from the two candidates was in serious doubt before the election even began. However, in the post-truth world some lies are expected and forgivable, and other lies are damning. In other words, Trump's dishonesty and Clinton's dishonesty manifested themselves in different scandals over the course of the election, and the public's reaction to those scandals represents concepts of post-truth in relation to politics.

Clinton's major email scandal came to dominate the news media, and seriously mired her credibility and integrity. Not only did the FBI investigation make her look suspicious of wrongdoing, it also made her appear incompetent. Even FBI director James Comey testified

saying that Clinton was “extremely careless” with her emails, however, no charges were ever filed against her of wrongdoing. But, in the public’s mind there was so much media attention and scrutiny surrounding event after event that they began to immediately associate Clinton with suspicion and dishonesty. Clinton’s perceived dishonesty was based on large, controversial cover-ups that aimed at mitigating public attention and hiding the truth. Donald Trump may have summarized public opinion best with what Scott Adams calls a linguistic kill shot, labeling her as “Crooked Hillary”.

On the other hand, Trump’s perceived dishonesty was based on exaggeration of fact and openness of misbehavior. He would inflate statistics or oversimplify complex policy issues or omit certain minor details. However, most news media were quickly able to point out his dishonesty, check his facts, and move on to other topics. Trump would then respond by correcting previous statements, clarifying his position, or openly deny the credibility of the source of this new information. Yet again, his labeling method proved effective by calling more and more sources of media “fake news”. Therefore, in the public’s mind, they had to either trust “Crooked Hillary” and the “fake” mainstream news, or trust Trump’s little white lies which could be easily disproven.

In addition, Trump’s comparably open and authentic handling of his respective scandal also exemplifies which character flaws the public can and cannot accept in a post-truth society. Much like Clinton’s email scandal dominated news media, the *Hollywood Access* videotape severely mired the public’s opinion of the Trump campaign. Many reporters and commentators believed that the vulgar and offensive comments made by Trump would spell a swift and certain end to his campaign chances. However, Trump’s reaction displayed openness and candor regarding the events. He dismissed and downplayed the seriousness of the tape writing it off as

“locker room talk”. This stands in stark contrast to the apparent secrecy and duplicity of Clinton’s scandal. Trump seemingly flaunted his scandal while Clinton tried to quietly hide the scandal from the public, which caused the public to grow even more suspicious. As Adams puts it,

“As bad as the scandal was, I find it hard to know for sure whether it helped or hurt Trump. My best guess is that it cost him votes, but it was less of a problem than people assumed it would be. Part of what protected Trump from the scandal is that some form of bad-boy sexual behavior was already baked into what we assumed about him. He never presented himself as an angel. It would have been a fatal mistake if he had.”

The scandal was also mitigated by Trump himself who compared what he said with comments Bill Clinton said, inevitably linking Hillary Clinton to his scandal. Lastly, Trump’s scandal was mitigated by another sexual scandal involving Anthony Weiner, a longtime friend and adviser to Clinton. Therefore, post-truth ethos seems to value the appearance of credibility more so than actual good character. Bad behavior, as evidenced by Trump’s scandal, does not necessarily end campaigns if the preconceived notions of the candidate aligns with the newly discovered scandal. In other words, if the scandal is dissonant with our perceptions of a candidate, the public will either create a reality where the scandal never happened, or the public will cease to support a candidate that appears to have bad character. Therefore, good character is still important, but it is ironically the attempt at covering up dishonesty that hurts public opinion more so than an honest admission of a scandal.

Social Media as a means of Post-Post-Truth Rhetoric

Lastly, I would like to quickly explore a new realm in political rhetoric that I believe will play a vital role in presidential elections in the foreseeable future: the rhetoric of social media. Social media first had a major impact in the 2008 presidential race, but it was later on, in the 2012 and especially the 2016 election that social media became a vital tool candidates needed to utilize effectively to win races. Indeed, technology has become the fastest means to disseminate information about candidates and their ideas. Outlets such as social media and the Internet create an interesting two-way street for truth. Ralph Keyes for instance claims, "Modern technology greases the skids of post-truthfulness." In his mind, lying is the norm online due to the anonymity that the Internet provides. There are not enough "gatekeepers" to distinguish truthful articles from deceitful articles online, therefore, what is fact can be interpreted as fiction and vice versa. However, as Joshua Kaneversky claims in his thesis entitled "Facebook and the Iowa Caucuses", "the openness and honesty of social media has rapidly increased the growth of social networks." "This model creates a unique place where honesty is the most valuable currency a person possesses" (Kaneversky). Yet again, it can be noted that truth is not dead. In fact, truth is more valuable than ever, but the source of the truth has irreversibly changed. Simply by logging onto a social network, we are able to share and communicate truth and lies much more rapidly than ever before. It should therefore come as no surprise that new rhetorical strategies have been developed that makes the dissemination of those ideas as effective as possible.

One could argue that social media aligns itself more closely with classic rhetoric. In some ways one could say that certain websites have more credibility or ethos than others. Wikipedia, for example, would be less believable than congress.gov. However, Wikipedia is

used much more frequently than congress.gov meaning that Wikipedia's knowledge is disseminated more often. A Wikipedia article may be 90% accurate, which is a satisfying amount of accuracy for some people, but there may still be 10% of the article that is factually inaccurate. And on top of that, who is to say that congress.gov or Facebook is consistently more accurate? Social media and the Internet are also frequently dominated by emotions and expressing how people feel, and not so much by facts, details, and logic. With the explosion of available information, anyone can find any article online that supports or rejects whatever their personal beliefs are. As a result, social media rhetoric may fall more in line with post-truth rhetoric due to the subjective nature of truth and the reliance on emotion over fact. Trump and Clinton both used post-truth rhetoric on their social media accounts, but in very different ways.

Trump's social media campaign sought to establish Trump as a presidential leader that is not afraid to say what he is thinking. "Trump started and maintains a campaign based on the emotion of distrust for the current government. His emotion and politically incorrect speech has allowed for social media users to see him as being open and honest" (Kaneversky). Trump's tactics on Facebook relied on using emotionally charged language to incite certain feelings in his followers. Trump also eschewed repeating information about himself that the public already knew. He did not mention the fact that he has no political experience, or that his family is wealthy, or that he used to host a popular TV show. The section describing who he is on his social media account was more interested in presenting who he is currently and portraying him as a good leader for the country.

Clinton, on the other hand, sort of did the opposite. The general impression was that a team of other people carefully cultivated her social media page for her. The overall feeling was that her posts were inauthentic and dishonest. The image she projected on Facebook was also

very different. Kaneversky claims that, "Clinton's page makes you feel like you are reading a friend's profile, allowing the viewer to feel like they know the candidate. Providing personal details (Downton Abby, Yoga and Wizard of OZ) makes Clinton seem like a real person and not just a politician." Therefore, the image she was projecting was the opposite of Trump's. She wanted to look *un-presidential*. She attempted to portray herself as a normal, relatable person whom the voters could identify with. It is also worth noting that each candidate's use of social media attempted to reverse the preconceived personas of each candidate. Trump's Facebook page wanted to portray a professional presidential candidate that speaks his mind, whereas Clinton tried to humanize her public persona by appearing to be more down to earth. This is important to note that social media can be used as a way to reverse, create, or supplement a candidate's ethos. In a way, social media allows people to create an entirely new persona, and both Clinton and Trump used this to their advantage in the 2016 election.

In addition to Facebook, the emergence of Twitter greatly expanded the amount of rhetoric each candidate could use to persuade voters. Chang Liu explored the ways that Trump used logos, ethos, and pathos to transform his social media rhetoric into an effective tool to win the presidency.

From the point of view of rhetoric, the candidate can convince voters to vote for him by enumerating the facts, evidence and figures. This method is called as resorting to reason (logo). Thus the voters approve him by understanding his program and his opinion and vote for him. However, in the face of today's complex social problems and challenges, only a small number of elites with appropriate background knowledge and strong political motives will be rationally persuaded by him. And more voters who are less educated are often influenced by ways of resorting to emotions (pathos). They are more likely to be attracted by extreme and firm statements, rather than those rational and careful statements. This is helped by Trump's speech which is full of confidence and a firm tone.

Liu continues her argument by citing several of Trump's tweets that show him using emotional language to bombastically attack his opponents. He also used short, easy to understand sentences to convey his ideas. It makes sense that logos may be an even weaker form of rhetoric on Twitter because the social media platform limits all posts to under 140 characters, making lengthy, detailed responses impossible. Trump's Twitter account also heavily relied on pathos to instill fear in the American public. Liu states that "Trump directly used the terms 'disaster', 'stupid', 'lost independence' to describe a Clinton presidency. These words are called 'fear appeals'. The purpose is to give the public a direct sense to feel fearful..." In addition, Trump's tweets also employed sympathy and humor to engage audiences and win over their support (Liu). Lastly, Trump tried to create ethos by citing his past experiences as a business entrepreneur to persuade voters that he knows how to run an economy. He also attempted to discredit other people's ethos by declaring any unfavorable poll or story as "fake news".

On the other side of the coin, Clinton's overall use of social media rhetoric was viewed as extremely ineffective by writers such as Scott Adams. Adams jokingly refers to Clinton's social media consultant as a "mole" for the Trump administration because it helped his campaign more than her campaign. "The biggest recurring problem with Clinton's tweets was that she repeatedly asked voters to 'Imagine President Trump'...and making voters imagine Trump as president was exactly what Trump was trying to do. This worked perfectly to help solve his biggest problem-voters couldn't imagine him in the job" (Adams, 2017). Also, Clinton simply failed to attract the same number of followers as Trump. Her posts were not as interesting or provocative enough to garner enough support to make her social media rhetoric as effective as Trump's.

As a result, it could be argued that social media, especially in 2016, represents a more efficient platform for the proliferation of post-truth rhetoric. For example, Twitter's reduction of available space for words shows that logos is still not very influential in persuasion. Also, Trump's use of short, repetitive phrases is the opposite of Clinton's preferred method of detail oriented cerebral messaging. Trump's use of fiery, passionate language caused him to gain millions of followers and disseminate his message faster and to more people. This is due to his authentic presentation of his emotions, whereas Clinton relied on a carefully designed, meticulously cultivated social media account that appeared restrained and inauthentic. Lastly, each candidate tried to reverse their public personas and reestablish ethos. Clinton tried to appear more normal and less political, but Trump capitalized on this by trying to appear more presidential and experienced. All of this creates the impression that communication via social media is the newest form of rhetorical persuasion, and that form of persuasion is permeated with the concepts of post-truth.

One Final Note:

Aristotle noted the nature of truth in his book *Metaphysics* saying:

"The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, no one fails entirely, but everyone says something true about the nature of things, and while individually they contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed. Therefore, since the truth seems to be like the proverbial door, which no one can fail to hit, in this way it is easy, but the fact that we can have a whole truth and not the particular part we aim at shows the difficulty of it. Perhaps, as difficulties are of two kinds, the cause of the present difficulty is not in the facts but in us."

Truth has always played a major role in human development. Even in Aristotle's time it was a concept that was difficult to comprehend fully. In Aristotle's mind rhetoric was the means with which speakers could determine and express the truth to audiences. This was done by using ethos, pathos, and logos effectively to persuade listeners. Classic rhetorical theory advocated for a large emphasis on ethos and *appearing* credible, and placed a relatively small role in the actual words of the speaker. Subsequent theorists, such as Machiavelli and Nietzsche, would state that rhetoric actually is a version of truth meant to enforce the speaker's will on the audience, and is therefore deceitful. Eventually, in a post-Watergate, media saturated environment, a new term was created to describe a new type of truth called post-truth. Post-truth is defined by a larger emphasis on pathos to persuade audiences, and a smaller role of ethos and logos. The term became solidified into the English vocabulary when it was chosen as the Word of the Year in 2016. In that year, the presidential election may have changed the very nature of truth itself as both candidates used post-truth rhetoric to persuade voters. Most notably, Clinton and Trump utilized social media to make the dissemination of post-truth rhetoric more efficient, and may have set a precedent for the rhetoric of many presidential elections in the near future.

As a result, I believe that it is crucially necessary to reevaluate Aristotle's claim that "Perhaps...the cause of the present difficulty is not in the facts but in us." My hope is that by being aware of our psychological "defects" as audience members we can attempt to understand the reality of our world. I argue that "fake news" represents the shadows of real objects in the cave, social media represents the chains that hold us in place, and post-truth represents the cave of modern society. The question remains, do we dare exit the cave?

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